THE CAVELESS MOUNTAINS:

A RECOVERY NARRATIVE

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
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By

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ABSTRACT

The Caveless Mountains: A Recovery Narrative explores the effect trauma has on a victim with family, friends and himself. My thesis covers growth and redemption in a cyclical world of falling and rising. Narrative voice becomes a primary tool used to map the development of character. The validity of memory is also addressed. Along with validity, my thesis challenges the gaps between what is nonfiction and fiction. Surrealistic visions similar involving animals help foreground the fictionalized parts. This surrealism is influenced by Native stories. While the thesis is grounded in non-fiction, the animal sections trouble the boundaries between non-fiction and fiction. The Trickster-like figure that serves as an interlude between hospital and flashback scenes helps ground the reader into an Indigenous author and character. Setting serves as an obstacle that prevents the protagonist, Texis' growth. Being so close with a developing character helps illustrate how little 'grown-ups' listen to those deemed childish, whether children or someone with a learning disability. Having Indigenous elements in a contemporary era helps bridge the gap between cultures.

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ARTIST'S STATEMENT

The Caveless Mountains: A Recovery Narrative is a hybrid text that blends elements of memoir and fiction. On the memoir side, my thesis explores repercussions of a brain injury I received when I was twenty-two. On the fiction side, I have always been fascinated with animal stories—specifically, Native animal stories, ranging from oral tales to stories found in contemporary writers.

The memoir form offered me a template for mapping out the personal journey of recovery from physical and psychological trauma. *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines a memoir as "a narrative recollection of the writer's earlier experiences, especially those involving unusual people, places, or events" (Baldick 202). While this definition is useful, memoirs based on traumatic events present particular challenges. In my case, although certain moments remained vivid in my memory, some parts of my recovery were obscured due to being unconscious or heavily sedated. These gaps presented me with a problem, but they also opened the door to fictionalizing elements of my story. How would I write my journey as non-fiction when I couldn't recall all the events with clarity? Phyllis Barber's notion of "The Fictional "I" in Nonfiction," provided a strategy in that, as Barber argues, a writer can be "just as inventive with the creation of "I" character as you are with any fiction character because you select fragments of yourself to support your thesis" (Jauss 183). This gave me permission to construct 'Texis' as a character in the text. Readers encounter Texis as a child, adolescent and a young man piecing his life back together. Texis' journey begins with waking up in a hospital and enduring a seven-week stint there, but the text offers flashbacks of a younger Texis as well. Scenes that portray Texis at earlier points in his life provide readers with a better grasp of life before the brain injury. Unfortunately, childhood was also marked by loss. Many memoirs deal with loss; two works that resonated strongly with me were Wab Kinew's *The Reason You Walk* and Abigail Thomas' *Safekeeping.* Kinew's book deals with trauma through flashbacks to a young aboriginal male's experiences. *Safekeeping* explores the loss of someone close to the narrator. Her concise windows into how loss impacts daily life provided inspiration. Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories* revealed the possibilities of presenting experiences in a chronological pattern. Tobias Wolff's memoir, *This Boy's Life* powerfully dramatizes a young male's family trauma. Wolff's Toby consistently found himself in trouble, but because of his age, readers maintained empathy towards him. Throughout the writing of *The Caveless Mountains* it remained important to me that readers empathized with Texis' journey to recovery.

As referenced, above, gaps in memory caused by trauma, while problematic, opened the door to fiction. Hallucination became a tool to highlight the borders between fact and fiction. Again, Indigenous authors provided useful models. Specifically, Sherman Alexie's book, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* provided a bridge from non-fiction to fiction in the ironic blurring of the line between 'real-life' and a notion of 'absolute truth.' States of unconsciousness, comas and hallucinations that Texis suffered in the aftermath of his accident opened a space for imaginary entities – specifically, animals, and a kind of trickster figure.

In many Indigenous cultures, the trickster is known as a shape-shifter. Scholarly work in Linda M. Morra and Deanna Reder's volume, *Troubling Tricksters: Revisioning Critical Conversations* informed the shape-shifter's presence in *The Caveless Mountains*; however, I wanted to create my own unique trickster especially since, as Craig Womack argues, "[t]here is no such thing as a trickster in Indigenous culture… tricksters were invented by anthropologists" (Morra and Reder 10). Kristina Fagan suggests the fluidity of the trickster figure in her observation that "…like the Navajo storytellers, contemporary Indigenous writers were using tradition to suit their purpose" (11). In a similar vein, Niigonwedom James Sinclair asserts that "Anishinaabeg trickster stories—the gender, shape, lineage, actions, and very

name, for example—depend on the storyteller(s), the context(s), the time(s), and the who/what/where/when/why a story is being told, as well as both to and for" (25). Given these perspectives, I no longer felt constrained by limiting the figure to a coyote. Tomson's Highway's *Kiss of the Fur Queen* exemplifies a re-imagined, unique trickster. Highway says that the trickster is "[e]ssentially a comic, clownish sort of character, his role is to teach us about the nature and the meaning of existence on the planet Earth; he straddles the consciousness of man and that of God, the Great Spirit" (Highway). The trickster in Highway's novel also straddles cultures, allowing Eurocentric elements into the text, at times creating what might be seen as an 'anti-trickster'. Linda Morra describes the 'anti-trickster' as something that "resembles its original Indigenous counterpart, but embodies Eurocentric ideas" (78). I wanted to have the shape-shifting figures that appear to Texis in various guises, both Indigenous and Eurocentric. These figures appear to Texis variously as a Death-like figure, even an angelic figure or guardian angel.

Eden Robinson's novel *Monkey Beach* offers an approach to the use of supernatural elements. Little Man appears to Lisa and gives her insight as to what will happen in the future. This figure appears before a traumatic event and always when Lisa is on the cusp of sleep. Appearing during a vulnerable state leaves the possibility that Lisa has visions of the future or that she could be hallucinating. *The Caveless Mountains*' supernatural appearances occur in a similar way; the interludes with shape-shifting beings appear to Texis while he is in a coma. This suggests that trickster's appearance may be ambiguous. While a supernatural presence functions to cue a flashback in *The Caveless Mountians*, the shape-shifter can be seen as prompting which flashback will occur. The shape-shifter could also be interpreted as preparing the coma-Texis for life after he wakes up. This would suggest that the supernatural figure can see into the future. This notion was prompted by Richard Van Camp's retelling of "Why Ravens Smile to Little Old Ladies as They Walk By…." The Raven is introduced with having the ability to see into the future. He ends up having his beak hidden in an old lady's vagina. Because he has the ability to see into the future, it could be seen that Raven intentionally let his beak be put up there. In the same way that Raven could see into the future, my figure could be seen as guiding me towards memories that would prepare me for the hardships of life after I wake up. Other appearances of the supernatural occur when the hospitalized Texis is heavily sedated, about to blackout, or on the cusp of sleep.

Supernatural aspects of *The Caveless Mountains* also include animals. The primary animal figures are Wolf, Racoon, Cougar, and Wolverine. With respect to animal characters, I chose to remain grounded in British Columbia wildlife. One animal that I likened myself to was the wolf. Texis and Wolf are also linked through first-person point of view. Wolves are pack-oriented and tend to stick together. This temperament suggests a desire to be with others, while also connoting wildness. I created likenesses between humans in my piece and animals. I chose Raccoon for its deceitful look, which foreshadows its falling-out with Wolf. Names also link the animal and the real-life person; for example, Lynx and Lyndon have the same beginning. Lynx is similar to Wolf in the way my brother Lyndon is to me. Cougar and Clay both begin with the letter 'C'. To me, Clay would be a cougar if he were to be attached to an animal in British Columbia. I chose my mother to be an owl, calling her *Skelule7*. While my grandmother told me stories of a giant *Skelule7* living up the mountainside from her house that steals misbehaving children, I chose to have my mother be an owl since owls can function as givers of knowledge and wisdom. My grandmother may have heard a similar version that she altered slightly to fit her needs to entertain and keep little children in line.

Using animal characters to represent human behaviours in a piece of writing is known as anthropomorphism. Through this project I was aware of the hazards of anthropomorphism as well as its prevalence – dating back to Aesop's Fables – yet literary works using animals sparked my imagination. For example, in Yann Martel's *Life of Pi*, Pi projects human personality onto a Bengal tiger. George Orwell's *Animal Farm* is an animal allegory. The raw, animalistic parts of my story revolve around human vices: alcohol, addiction, and money. Animals stood in for actual individuals to protect those individuals' privacy. This choice reflects the meeting ground of memoir and fiction, the two primary, intermingling elements of *The Caveless Mountains*.

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DEDICATION

To momma L, my brother, and you beautiful fucks who've watched me in diapers.

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